



Committee On Finance

Max Baucus, Ranking Member

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Baucus Expresses Frustration at Elimination of Cuba Travel Ban Language *Congressional Leaders Thwart Will of Congress, Remove Provisions Lifting Travel Ban*

(WASHINGTON, D.C.) U.S. Senator Max Baucus today released a statement emphasizing his dissatisfaction with a decision by the Congressional leadership to override the will of Congress by continuing to fund enforcement of the Cuba travel ban.

Earlier this year, both the Senate and House voted overwhelmingly to eliminate funding that goes toward the enforcement of the Cuba travel ban. The provision was included in the fiscal year 2004 Treasury-Transportation Appropriations bill, but was removed by congressional leadership this week.

Baucus, who traveled to Cuba in September, has played a leading role in pushing Congress and the Administration to reexamine America's policy toward Cuba, citing that 40 years of embargo have done nothing to improve Cuba's political climate or help the Cuban people. Earlier this year, Baucus introduced legislation that would seek to lift the trade embargo against Cuba, and remove travel restrictions between the U.S. and Cuba.

Baucus today said that he remains committed to the elimination of the Cuba travel ban and lifting of the Cuba embargo and will resume the fight when Congress returns in January.

Full Senate floor statement follows:

"I rise today to express deep frustration with the way congressional leaders have thwarted the will of the majority of members on Cuba.

Last month, the Senate approved an amendment to the Transportation-Treasury appropriations bill that would suspend enforcement of the Cuba travel restrictions. We passed this amendment 59-36 - a 23 vote margin. In September, the House approved the same amendment 227-188 - a 39 vote margin.

Both chambers of Congress approved the same amendment to suspend enforcement of the Cuba travel ban and to allow travel by Americans to Cuba. These votes reflected the sentiments of the overwhelming majority of Americans who support ending the utterly ineffectual travel ban.

Opinion leaders, too, in newspapers all across the country, in papers big and small, applauded the Senate and House votes. Orlando, Chicago, New York, Winston-Salem, Tuscaloosa, San Diego.

Papers from every corner of the country commended Congress for its efforts and called for an end to the absurd travel ban.

Then, the Senate Foreign Relations approved, by a 13-5 margin, S.950, the “Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act of 2003, which would permanently repeal the Cuba travel ban. Senator Enzi and I introduced this legislation along with 31 of our colleagues, from both sides of the aisle and representing every region of this country, because we felt the time had come to end this pointless ban on American liberty. As its vote demonstrates, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee agrees.

Given these votes, and given the popular support for our efforts to end the travel ban, one would think the conferees of the Transportation-Treasury appropriations bill would not be able to strip out our amendment. When the Senate and House have approved the same amendment, there ought to be nothing for conferees to reconcile.

But here we are with an omnibus bill that does not include our amendment to suspend enforcement of the Cuba travel ban. How did this happen?

It wasn’t the conferees. Thirteen of the 16 Senate conferees were supportive of our amendment. The conferees would not have stripped out the amendment.

But the congressional leadership would. And they did, before even submitting the bill to the conference committee for consideration. They pointed to a phony veto threat - not made by the President - to justify a blatantly political move calculated to improve their standing with a small number of constituents in Florida.

This, despite a recent poll by the Miami Herald and St. Petersburg Times that found that most Florida voters favor lifting the ban on travel to Cuba - by better than a two to one margin.

Is this democracy in action? Is this the example we are setting for the rest of the world? Is the example of participatory government that we hold to the Cuban dissidents as the beacon of freedom and liberty?

If this ugly episode were the only consequence of this Administration’s obsession with retaining the failed Cuba travel ban, that would be bad enough.

But it’s not the only consequence. Far worse, the Administration’s pandering to its south Florida allies is undermining U.S. efforts to fight terrorism.

The Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is charged with enforcing sanctions against foreign countries, terrorist networks, international narcotics traffickers, and those involved in proliferating weapons of mass destruction.

This is important work crucial to the security of our nation. We are in dangerous times, and OFAC is on the front lines protecting America from those who wish us ill.

But under new Administration guidelines, OFAC has diverted resources from guarding against terrorism to tightening the sanctions against Cuba, including enforcing the Cuba travel ban. OFAC dedicates nearly a sixth of its employees to enforcing the failed sanctions against Cuba.

Think about that. The United States recently fought wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Our troops, embassies, and citizens living abroad are exposed to terrorist threats on a daily basis. There are other countries - like Iran, Syria, and Sudan - that are known to harbor Al-Qaeda and other terrorists, and others still that are known to be seeking to purchase or develop weapons of mass destruction.

Yet, instead of devoting every penny and every resource to fighting these dangers, nearly one-sixth of OFAC employees must waste their time enforcing the Cuba travel ban and other embargo-related matters.

In a further sign of the Administration's misplaced priorities when it comes to Cuba, the Department of Homeland Security recently announced that it would begin diverting crucial and urgently needed resources away from the war on terrorism in order to enforce the travel restrictions against ordinary Americans who want to travel to Cuba.

I am certain the American people would agree with me that this is outrageous. The question is what we can do about it. The answer is simple. Repeal the Cuba travel ban.

We've made a lot of progress this session. One third of the Senate has co-sponsored legislation to end the travel ban. Reason and momentum are on our side. Let me assure my colleagues and the Administration that this issue is not going away. We will be back in the next session of Congress to continue the fight, and we will fight harder than ever.

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